

# Firms Lock Down Chance at Hiring Parolees

Workplace: Some  
Arrive on the Job  
With Certification

BY JESSICA LONG

---

An aggressive new campaign targeting local business owners looking for a chance to boost their work force — and possibly save money doing it — is being launched by the state Prison Industry Authority with help from a major San Diego defense contractor.

National Steel and Shipbuilding Co. has been hiring ex-offenders for about 20 years, mostly to fill welding positions. Now the local shipbuilder is sharing its story with other companies in the hopes of encouraging more San Diego businesses to hire recently paroled prisoners.

With more than 4,000 employees, Nassco's human resources costs are enormous. The cost-saving advantages of hiring ex-offenders referred by the Prison Industry Authority are significant, according to Stephen Clarey, director of marketing and public relations for the company.

Clarey said Nassco spends about \$30,000 for every new employee it hires, paying for everything from background checks to journeymen processes. Because ex-offenders come to Nassco with background checks and welding certifications already complete, Clarey said his company can save \$10,000 to \$15,000 on those hires.

"It's been a good program for us, especially working on government projects, because we have to be very diligent with reviewing records and background checks and PIA is doing it for us," Clarey said.

The Prison Industry Authority is a self-funded entity within the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation that runs a variety of businesses staffed by prison inmates and is hoping to find jobs for them once they qualify for parole privileges. Because they fund themselves, no formal legislative approval was needed to launch this campaign.

In exchange for hiring ex-offenders from the Prison Industry Authority, local businesses can be eligible for tax incentives while employing already-trained new hires who come with extensive background check information.

The newly launched Community Re-entry Project campaign, which was unveiled late last month, aims to reduce the number of parolees returning to prison for a second sentence. Currently, 60 percent of all felony parolees return to prison within three years of their release, according to information gathered by the Department of Corrections' Risk Management Division.

Inmates who work for the Prison Industry Authority do so on a volunteer basis and have a variety of criminal pasts.

"This is a brand-new endeavor that's going to make California safer," said Prison Industry Authority General Manager Matt Powers, noting that the re-entry project will be more organized than previous efforts to assist parolees in the transition process.

## Success Story

In the last five years, about a dozen ex-offenders have been hired to work for Nassco. Records on the number of ex-offender hires previous to five years ago are not available.

Of the 12 ex-offenders hired by Nassco in the past five years, Clarey said none has left the company for any disciplinary or skill-related reasons. In fact, Clarey said that it has been Nassco's experience that ex-offenders tend to be highly motivated, mature workers with a stronger sense for punctuality and accountability than other "normal" hires because they have more at stake if they fail.

## How Will It Work

Once more businesses sign on to hire men and women on parole under the new re-entry program, the Prison Industry Authority will work collaboratively with the San Diego County Sheriff's Department and Mental Health Systems, Inc. to chart a prisoner's plans after release — nine months before that day actually comes. In addition to job preparation, prisoners will get help with housing, transportation, life skills and support services.

“Our world is so complicated now; it’s not so easy to go out and find a job,” said Bill Eastwood, the executive director for Mental Health Systems, a privately run company based in San Diego that specializes in social services-type rehabilitation.

Powers said he would like to get enough businesses involved to see a 5 percent to 10 percent reduction in the state’s recidivist rate “very soon.”

“We’re not proud of our recidivism rate and it needs to be broke,” Powers said.

Most of the businesses run by the Prison Industry Authority are trade-related jobs that include textile work, bakery services, metal work and furniture making. But some inmates also learn clerical and computer skills by doing administrative work for the Prison Industry Authority.

### **Early Predictions**

Although there are several other businesses in the county that regularly hire men and women on parole, few like to discuss it as publicly as Nassco does, according to Rex Gregory, inmate employability coordinator at R.J. Donovan Correctional Facility in Otay Mesa, where bakery, optical lens and textile businesses are run.

“The stigma is sad, it really is,” Gregory said, noting that aside from help getting in to the job, ex-offenders get no special treatment.

Because most of the businesses run by the Prison Industry Authority involve more trade-type training, Gregory said the industries best suited to ex-offenders would include hotels/motels, laundry businesses and home construction companies.

The next step in the Prison Industry Authority’s aggressive campaign to get more San Diego businesses to hire ex-offenders is to get them to attend a San Diego employers’ forum from 9 a.m. to noon on Oct. 20 at the Holiday Inn, Mission Valley. Employers interested in the event can call (916) 358-1802 for more information.

Steve Zolezzi, the executive vice president of the Food & Beverage Association of San Diego, isn’t sure whether the hospitality industry is prepared for an influx of parolees in hotel kitchens, but he said he thinks it’s an interesting concept.

Zolezzi said there probably already are some ex-offenders in the industry, but whether companies want to make it a large part of their hiring strategies will probably depend on the size of the company.

“Typically, it’d be more appealing to larger chain operations with larger management staffs to monitor the program,” Zolezzi said. “It’s not as appealing to someone who owns maybe one or two operations because they don’t have the same administrative resources.”

Powers concedes there are inherent drawbacks to hiring ex-offenders, but said he believes the new re-entry project will be successful.

“Yes, there are some risks attached,” Powers said. “I don’t want to deny that. But the social costs of failure is unacceptable.”